

Regional Governance Subcommittee King County Charter Review Commission

Summary of Issues and Amendment Proposals

Regional Committees

Context

Regional Committees were established by charter amendment as part of the merger of King County and Metro in 1992. The charter was amended to create three multi-jurisdictional policy committees for transit, water quality and regional issues. Regional Committees were envisioned to be an essential part of what would make King County a truly regional government, i.e., regional not being defined merely as geographic coverage of services, but as bringing together the cities and the county to address mutual concerns. The 1996-1997 Commission noted structural and attitudinal problems that were preventing the Regional Committees from functioning as forums for regional issues. It recommended the following:

1. Allow the appointing body to designate alternates to the Regional Committees.
2. Allow the Regional Committees to select their own chair and establish their own operating procedures.
3. Delete the term "countywide" to avoid confusion with the term "regional" which is also used in Section 270.
4. Allow the Regional Committees to initiate their own legislation.
5. Require the Metropolitan King County Council to respond to Regional Committee recommended ordinances within 90 days (amend, reject or approve) or the matter would be referred to the voters.

By unanimous vote, the Commission recommended these charter amendments to the King County Council for placement on the ballot in November 1997. The Council took no action on these recommendations.

Current Issues

Over a dozen issues were raised about Regional Committees over the course of the public meetings. Generally, these issues focused on modifying the structure and function of these Committees in order to broaden and strengthen their authority and make their membership more representative and proportional to county populations, including tribal peoples. In addition, the Commission received at least two comments calling for a charter amendment that would require King County government to promote and advance "sustainability."

Departmental and Personnel Issues

Citizens made about 15 Charter amendment recommendations relating to departmental/personnel issues. These ranged from whistle blower protections for County employees to several specific and substantive proposals for the Sheriff's Office. These included replacing the Department of Public Safety with the Sheriff's Office and removing it as an agency or department under the County Executive branch and making it subject to the civil service system. Several of these comments focused on the status of the Office in terms of labor policy and called for the King County Sheriff to be designated the bargaining agent for King County Sheriff's Office employees. In addition, other citizens called for regular reviews of department performance and efficiency, and integration of regulatory, policy and procedural requirements among county agencies, particularly those with regulatory enforcement authority. One departmental issue that overlaps with Council procedure dealt with the giving the Council some authority in appointing and terminating department heads. Finally, the Municipal League of King County and former Council Member Brian Derdowski proposed that the Ombudsman Office have a dedicated budget to prevent interference with its investigations of other departments.

County Budgeting

Citizens raised a number of concerns and proposals about the county budget. Some of these targeted the need for a greater level of detail in the budget itself. For example, comments included calls for the Executive to include in his proposed budget debt ceiling and reserve figures, inflation factors and the assumptions on which they are based, and separate line items for mitigation expenses on capital projects. Other comments focused on increasing access to information, not only for the public, but for the Council, as well by requiring the Executive to submit to the Council quarterly budget updates and requiring the statement of the financial and governmental affairs to be presented quarterly rather than annually. In addition, other comments called for the Executive's budget message to be publicly available in a format that would allow citizens to view the data on which the budget is based. Other comments focused on the budget baselines (zero based), separating the regional from the local service budgets, and reducing lease durations. More far-reaching proposals included making the Budget Office separate from the Executive Office and establishing budget procedures whereby both the legislative and the executive branches may initiate budget items and have access to data in the Office of Financial Management.

Several proposed charter amendments have implications for Council procedures. These included the following:

- Allow the Council to approve abandonment of any capital project without an Executive recommendation. (Section 475)
- Require contracts to be based on actual costs, and disallow escalator penalties. Require the Executive to inform the Council in writing of any proposed capital expenditure over \$200,000 at least three business days in advance and to make a presentation to the Council for any proposed capital expenditure over \$1 million. (Section 460)
- Require agencies to answer Councilmember questions regarding budget items in a timely manner or by subject to charges of malfeasance. Present to Council budget staff all agency proposals issued to the Executive within 10 days of receipt and provide Council budget staff with access to all budget documents for analysis and evaluation. (Section 420)
- Require the Executive to present the annual budget message to the Council before releasing it to the media and provide the council with more time to review the budget (more than the current 75 days before the end of the fiscal year. (Section 410) [Note: One comment referred to this time as 30 days and called for increasing this time for review to 40 days.]
- Require the withholding of any appropriations or changes over a specific threshold (such as 10 or 20 percent) to be approved by the Council. (Section 475)

Council Procedure

The proposals for charter amendments to change Council procedures covered a wide range of issues. These ranged from increasing the Council's authority, oversight and access to information to requiring the Council to follow quorum rules in holding its meetings and to taping executive sessions of the Council for PAO review.

King County Library System

At public meetings and in emails, citizens spoke about the need for the County Charter to address mismanagement of and deficiencies in the King County Library System (KCLS). They cited the need for more oversight for governing board of trustees and a lack of communication and leadership in the library system. [Note: The PAO identifies this issue as preempted by state law.]